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The Changing Face of Social Consciousness in Singapore: An Interview with Ann Wee

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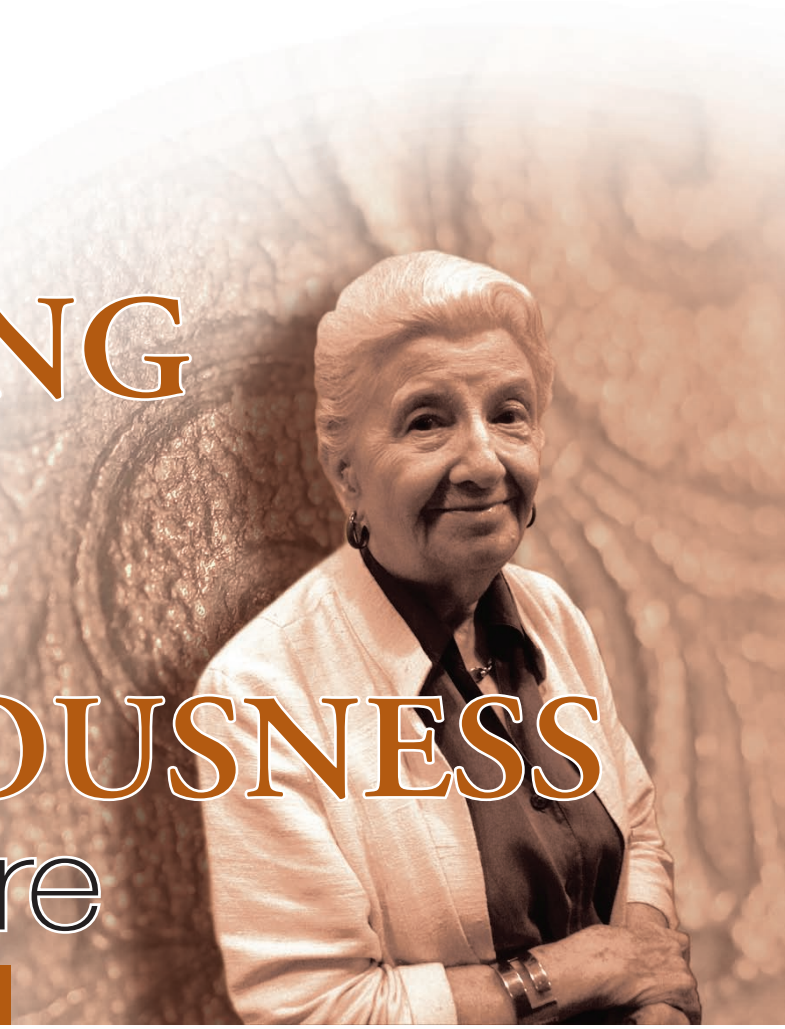

An Interview with Ann Wee

Social consciousness and the provision for social needs have grown in Singapore, creating an urgency to develop creative ways to keep meeting evolving needs. Having made Singapore her home for 59 years, social work veteran Ann Wee shared with *Social Space* interesting snippets of her early life in Singapore, in the midst of sharing her views on the rapid changes taking place in the social sphere.

SS: *Seeing the rapid changes taking place in the social sphere, in your opinion, are the various social welfare agencies keeping up with providing for their beneficiaries?*

AW: In some sense, social services provision is always trying to keep up with the issues – or if possible anticipate them. One problem in some service areas is the difficulty of performing cost-benefit analysis. In social issues, it is often very difficult to measure outcomes by success rates.

Take juvenile courts for instance. One would be very worried if a probation service had a 95% success rate. This would mean that the courts were pushing more youths into custodial treatment than required and we know, worldwide, that even the best custodial treatment carries risks, the most obvious being contamination by contact with even more disordered characters. So courts need to take risks on probation, even with youths who are seen as less than easy to manage. Most are not violent, or have committed offences against property – a class of offences that is a great nuisance, but does not threaten public safety. So even though some who are put on probation will re-offend, the courts will have saved others from the unnecessary risks of custodial experience.

We should look on the positive side. One small local study some decades ago showed that of these high risk youths, 60% did in fact reoffend. But 40% were success stories. So out of 100 youths, 40 were saved the destructive experience of a custodial sentence, and that's important for their future lives as law abiding citizens.

The public has great faith in counselling but this is not always the answer. If the problem is in you, and you yourself can make the needed change, then group or individual counselling will help solve the problem. But if the problem is in the social system – for example the family, the school, the neighbourhood – counselling can only teach you to be more resilient. Tackling a systemic problem calls for a social work approach, which may include counselling.

SS: *How are services provided today different from say 30-40 years ago?*

AW: Immensely different. I can cite the way we handle cases of delinquency now. For example, many juvenile offenders are never brought to court. If the police assess the case as not too serious, the youth is referred for a six-month group work and counselling Guidance Programme, which also brings in parents. Only those who fail to participate and obey the rules, (which include a requirement to be home by a reasonable hour every night) are brought before the juvenile court.

SS: *How do we compare with more developed nations?*

AW: In some sectors we do better than most, in some we still need to think through policies. When your demographic situation is 6,000 persons per sq km, that's one great difference in the options you have! One of our problems in service provision is the lack of space. Most welfare homes are unable to have the grassy spaces that encourage healthy outdoor activities. We have to address children's issues, more by social work (at community, group, or case-work level) and counselling.

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The point of the whole network of assistance is to help the individual and sometimes the family as well, to reach a stage where they hopefully don't need any service.

SS: *In your opinion, what kind of services are difficult for VWOs to meet?*

AW: I wish we could build a model that works out the cost to society over time, of a family which has every possible social problem you could think of. (Sometimes it is referred to as a 'dysfunctional' family. I would prefer to use the term 'multi-problem family'). We need a welfare economist to build an 'over the lifetime model' to measure, for example, loss of potential productivity, costs to social services, prisons, 'wasted schooling' (number of years/months lost), preventable ill health etc. Basically, I am talking about the cost to society as a whole.

Providing services to a family with multiple problems requires Intensive Case Management (ICM) which is very labour intensive, and may not show results for say, a couple of years. But there is plenty of evidence that in the end long-term work produces results, and the dangers of 'hereditary problem' status can be averted. A labour intensive service is so costly that funding is a problem, unless we have an economic model of the high social costs, where only 'band-aid' service is applied. We need to demonstrate that intensive work pays society in the end.

SS: *What are your views on families losing their conventional roles in the lives of children? Children are going home to caregivers (eg. maids) and spending more time with them than with their own parents. What are some areas to watch out for, to avoid future pitfalls?*

AW: That's a pretty middle class situation. In the past, middle class children often went home to *amahs* (nannies), and the Mum who did not work could well be out with friends or playing mahjong! Maybe we over-fuss about maids in today's context? *Amahs* were on average older than present day home help – but school-age children soon learned how to run rings round

The Division IV employee of the past had union membership, annual leave, medical benefits. Now no paid day-off. To give one example of what that means — a day to take your child (or yourself) to the clinic is a day's wages lost. No wonder we get neglect of low-symptom conditions like diabetes and high blood pressure! Then we'll see these later on as strokes, kidney dialysis and diabetic amputations, and all the social costs to the individual, the family and the society of the unemployable adult.

them in terms of any discipline efforts! Although a lot of women do give up work to be with their children, and in some homes a grandmother is present, still truly there is some dependency on helpers – but only amongst families of some means.

Of even more concern is the child from a lower income family who comes back to an empty home, because mother can neither afford home help nor give up outside work herself. Student care programmes exist, but there are costs which many feel they can ill-afford.

SS: *Some marginalised groups (eg. the lower middle class wedge, single mothers, the unseen poor in Singapore) continue to face recurrent problems which are often seen as rooted in family or culture. What is your view on this?*

AW: Income gaps are more responsible for this than problems just being culturally rooted. Some potential success stories lie within all of us, but it is much harder for us to succeed if we are handicapped by all the problems that come with very low income. Of course, there are also problems that are not limited to those with low income. For example, the problems of teenage misbehaviour: If only parents would think in terms of 'child management' rather than 'child discipline'. But society goes on talking about child discipline – that is, what to do when unacceptable behaviour occurs. We reduce the incidence of negative behaviour from children if we manage our children wisely. If you are in charge of a commercial enterprise, your job is to manage people in such a way as to foster cooperative and productive behaviour. Likewise if you manage your child, you will bring out cooperative behaviour from them. This way you get the children on your side and manage your home or family better. It is important to remember: Condemn the bad behaviour of the child, do not condemn the child.

Too often, we fail to distinguish the sin from the sinner. The message needs to be: "That behaviour is wrong/unacceptable/bad–for-you, but basically you are a good kid who can do much better than that". If we have developed an open chit-chat relationship with our children, (even from the days when their conversation was perhaps pretty boring!) the management style just grows from that. Then one important thing we can do, as they grow into their teenage years, is to make contracts with them. If we concede some freedom, then they must agree to observe certain family rules. Try not to make too many rules, but make the important ones and make it very clear that you will stick to these. This may not solve every problem, but it often works better than either being too strict or too indulgent – making some rules is a sign that we care! And one golden rule – be unmoved by the "so-and-so's mother says it's alright" tactic. Maybe, "but our family is different, and it's not good enough for us" (full stop)!

In cases of child abuse very often the problem is that parents just don't know what to do in the face of bad behaviour. They are desperate. So they resort to harsh discipline which just doesn't produce desired results, so they get even harsher and cross over the borderline of abuse.

SS: *What are some other areas you wish were given more attention?*

AW: The first area of concern would be ensuring fair treatment for foreign workers. Firstly, we pride ourselves in being a nation where justice and human decency prevail. Secondly – and this is rarely thought of – because these thousands of men and women contribute positively or negatively to our regional/ international image, depending on what they say about us when they go back home!

I am also concerned about the issue of our own citizen contract workers – cleaners, security

guards, gardeners, etc. Many jobs that used to serve as direct employment have been outsourced to contractors, involving a steep deterioration in the terms of employment for thousands of our least educated fellow citizens. I wrote about this to *The Straits Times* in March 2006. I was hugely disappointed that the editor shortened the article and furthermore, it did not seem to lead to any discussion of the issue.

The 'Division IV' employee of the past had union membership, annual leave and medical benefits. Now, they have no paid day-off. To give one example of what that means – a day to take your child (or yourself) to the clinic is a day's wages lost. No wonder we get neglect of low-symptom conditions like diabetes and high blood pressure! Then we'll see these later on as strokes, kidney dialysis and diabetic amputations, and all the social costs to the individual, the family and society of the unemployable adult.

The stress of such employment cannot be healthy for the worker, the family or for us all in the long run. Imagine the life of the security guard who leaves his home, say in Tampines at 6.30am, in order to report 8am for a 12-hour shift, in say the Holland Road area. He comes off duty at 8pm, and reaches home by 9.30pm. And there is no five-day week for him. He does this seven days a week, and if he takes one Sunday off in the month, that will cost him a day's pay. Singapore offers an admirable range of training and upgrading opportunities, but we know that many do not have the basis to take these up – for reasons of age, lack of enterprise and yes, also fear of failure.

Where physical strength is not an issue, there should be no reduction in output by a person over 50, indeed, for many people well past that age. The wage-scale-related-to-seniority system doesn't help, but the problem of perception is much more than that. And 'untrainable'? If you are untrainable at age 50, you probably were not much good at age 25!

"Expensive healthcare?" I recall an American study which found that workers over the age of 50, unless they had a specific illness, took less sick-leave than younger workers – and they are unlikely to be worrying about a young child ill at home. I do not claim that all older people are 'wise' because of age, but those who have some wisdom do have experience of what worked or did not work in a given situation, and their 'institutional memory' can be of great value to an organisation.

Under-appreciation of older workers is a problem not only for the old themselves, but because it leads to a national wastage of productivity, which we can ill-afford. We need initiatives to combat prejudice against older workers. Especially in the private sector, there is a perception that workers are not suitable, for no other reason except that they are old – even in occupations where physical strength is not the main criterion.

SS: *Can you highlight what you think have been some of Singapore's most significant achievements in the social sphere?*

AW: Too many to list, but the upgrading of our Institutes of Technical Education (ITE) is one of the most exciting of Singapore's initiatives. Societies find it relatively easy to invest in the most able children, but very many slip up and neglect the less able/late developers. It has been truly heartwarming to see ITE move from the time when the joke was that it meant "It's The End" to the point where now it can be the first step towards a Polytechnic and then to University. It was a proud day for all Singaporeans when *The Straits Times* (25 September 2007) announced that Singapore had received the prestigious IBM Innovations Award in Transforming Governance, from Harvard University's John F Kennedy School of Government. I gladly have that press cutting on my desk till today!

Another social initiative worthy of mention is the Prison Service's education section, including the Worker Improvement through Secondary Education (WISE) and the Basic Education for Skills Training (BEST)) programmes, and the extent to which prisoners enter as 'no hopers' and come out with a marketable qualification.

Hopefully, we will move to a whole new generation where the vast majority will be equipped for better employment through society's sheer appreciation of their value. ❖

Ann Wee's involvement in Singapore's social services and social work dates back to the early 1950s. She started teaching at the University in 1952, and took on headship of the Social Work Department from 1968 to 1986. She has published in books on family, immigrants and social work education in Singapore. Conferred BBM (Bintang Bakti Masyarakat or Public Service Star) in 1972, she was further awarded the Public Service Star (Bar) in 2004. For over 30 years, she has been a member of the Panel of Advisors to the Juvenile Court. For six years, she was also a member of the Tribunal for the Maintenance of Parents.